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ABSTRACT

Australian education and training and vocational education and training (VET) research are in a state of crisis. Both the higher education and VET sectors are now squeezed and subject to contradictory objectives, multiple accountabilities, heightened expectations, and diminished resources in an environment of uncertainty and frustration. The research training environment is little better, and the VET research community is in a particularly vulnerable position. Publicly funded VET research has enjoyed a period of steady growth in activity since the late 1980s. However, serious questions are beginning to arise about the nature and character of the orientation of VET research and the identity and purpose of VET research. The environment is increasingly being dominated by "evaluative" research that is mostly directed to the science of policy rather than a wider exploration of issues. There is also a prevailing view that unless research is immediately "useful" in addressing the needs of government, it lacks legitimacy. The future for VET researchers is increasingly related to future changes to the work of teachers and VET practitioners. Many opportunities for postgraduate research are shrinking, and success in competitive grants has such low odds of success that it is difficult to see where future developments will originate. (Contains 10 references.) (MN)

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Issues in VET research: current crisis and potential possibilities

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Introduction and disclaimers

This paper is a polemic concerning questions about the future of vocational education and training (VET) research, the character and identity of VET researchers, the training of VET researchers and the development of theoretical and practical models which open up opportunities for collaborative partnerships between university-based and VET-based researchers.

The paper is a delayed response to many of the issues that Rod McDonald explored in his address to the 2000 AVETRA conference. This is not a rigorous empirical analysis of VET research or a highly complex argument about paradigm wars and the suitability of certain methodologies in VET research. It is also not the position of the AVETRA executive of which I am a member, but an entirely individual opinion.

It is an attempt to explore elements of a discussion about the environment in which VET researchers find themselves, look at developments in the past and start to look at new sets of opportunities. This paper will argue that the future of VET research is related to and influenced by changes to VET teachers' work, and new models and theoretical approaches to research are needed to account for this. This paper argues the urgency of these changes and suggests that the profession and the members of AVETRA face a series of considerable crises.

The discussion has been one that AVETRA has been struggling with since its inception in 1997 and addresses the false impression that the work of university and VET-based researchers is fundamentally different. As a person who has managed and taught in both higher education and TAFE, I am convinced the market conditions in both sectors are creating similar pressures, tendencies and outcomes which make the workplace and working life in both sectors very similar. The recognition of these similarities opens up questions about a more common identity for VET researchers. This is also linked to the crisis-ridden nature of the education training industry in Australia.

The crisis in the politics of state Australian education and training and VET research

Both the higher education and VET sectors are now squeezed and subject to contradictory objectives, multiple accountabilities, heightened expectations and diminished resources in an environment of uncertainty and frustration. It is a miracle that the Australian education system is working at all.

The crisis is plain for all to see. The evidence is here:

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- The Commonwealth contribution to VET has fallen from close to $950m in 1997 to $825m in 1999 (NCVER 2000; NCVER 1999)
- Commonwealth expenditure as a percentage of GDP has gone down from .075% in 1996 to .058% in 2000-2001, and down further to below .055% in 2003-2004.

- Research and development expenditure has dropped from .043% as a percentage of GDP in 1990-1991 to .035% in 1998-1999.

All the expenditure graphs and diagrams look like alpine ski jumps progressing downwards. Australia now ranks so badly that in OECD terms, on combined expenditure we are only above Luxembourg, Japan and Greece.

Just to remain treading water, Australia would need to bring its expenditure up a further $5.1 billion or 18% per annum of current outlays.

While the inputs are falling, the demands on the system are not. The Australian Education Union (AEU) estimates that there will be a 5.7% increase in TAFE enrolments, and to counter balance the decline in funding, is demanding an increase of $310m.

The research training environment is little better and because of VET research's recent arrival in the research arena, the VET research community is in a particularly vulnerable position. Key changes include:

- Abolition of HECs-funded postgraduate research places and the introduction of an allocated level of 25,000 research places.

- Falls in participation levels in postgraduate coursework degrees in education and training of 25% after the introduction of full fees (Meyenn 1999).

- Australian Research Council funding, although being increased by $240m, will predominantly be directed to traditional science and technology-based faculties.

To cap off a challenging environment:

- VET research didn't rate a mention in the much vaunted federal government Innovations Statement.

- The frenzy around teacher shortages in the politically sensitive areas of primary and secondary schooling will mean that VET teacher training and research will be squeezed in the 'carve up' of teacher training funds. The increased popularity of VET in Schools programs will mean that there may be some integration with secondary teaching, providing some future opportunities.

- There is no real universal agreement on a minimum qualification for VET teachers. Indeed, the industry benchmark for teacher qualifications seems to be accepted as the Certificate IV in workplace training. This qualification level

is below significant parts of the VET profile in AQF levels 5-7. Some enlightened training organisations, under pressure from unions, have incorporated qualification ceilings as part of their enterprise agreements, but the tendency is towards a 'minimalist' line on qualifications.

- There is a greying of the VET teacher profile in TAFE, and this suggests that the next ten years will be a decade when the issues of renewal of a teaching workforce will occupy a new importance. Accompanying this will be an exploration of what work teachers might be doing in the context of new learning technologies and the changing nature of work generally.

Coupled with this is a highly risky politicised research environment characterised by high levels of political interference, vetting and sanitising. Research has been increasingly used as part of state 'image management' and as an instrument of government. The notion that publicly funded research is essentially part of the democratic process of informing citizens seems to be an unpopular notion, with bureaucrats and politicians anxious to avoid any criticisms of government performance. In the post-1996 era, the legitimacy of certain types of research has also been hysterically discredited. The Howard government and its allies have collectively criticised the 'black armband' history mentality surrounding revisionist and critical histories, and have actively intervened to prevent ARC grants going to projects that might be antipathetic to the government line.

This complex scenario now characterises the general research environment in Australia. It is an environment which is also typified by claims of a 'brain drain', as researchers flock overseas as a result of the frustration of a very unsympathetic intellectual environment, being lured by better pay conditions and research funds elsewhere.

The crisis of sponsorship, purpose and direction?

Publicly funded VET research has enjoyed a period of steady growth in activity since the late 1980s. The report *No Small Change* (McDonald 1993) acted as a catalyst for this in acting as both an audit on research at the time and a vehicle for developing a national strategy. The other prime move for growth was The Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council (ANTARAC), which distributed research funds in VET until 1996 when this role was undertaken by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). NCVER has been the managing agent for the National Research and Evaluation Strategy for VET 2001-2003 and has identified ten priority areas and allocated funding on a national basis.

Funding for VET broadly spans three areas:

- The development of reference data on VET
- The funding of National Research Centres and National Projects
- The funding of targeted and open category grants on an annual basis.

The National VET research strategy closely shadowed the development of reforms in the VET sector, which have been broadly described as the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA). The NTRA was arguably one of the most instrumental and

interventionist policy developments of the labour years and this tradition has been continued by the coalition Howard government.

Ideologically committed to a de-regulationist approach that demanded a VET system with greater proximity to the needs of industry, the NTRA policy makers excluded educationalists, some unionists, small business, academics and VET teachers. The NTRA adopted a mantra of competition, privatisation, instrumental restructuring and unrelenting waves of reforms which has tended to confuse and alienate many stakeholders. It would be untrue to argue that there were no benefits, but it is also true to say the cost has been high.

In the context of this highly interventionist environment, the state research agenda naturally closely shadowed government priorities. While *No Small Change* (McDonald 1993) lamented the absence of a strong critique of developments in VET, it is unlikely that it will ever emerge from a state-funded research program which is closely aligned with policy implementation. In the context of contemporary public administration, research is seen as occupying a major role in image management.

It is interesting to look at the spread of funds in the National Research and Evaluation Council's (NREC) research in 2000. The break up reported in the latest AVETRA *Research Today* is as follows. There were 185 submissions

- Universities had 89 submissions and were successful in 16, having a 18% success rate.
- TAFE and private institutions submitted 36 and were successful, with seven having a success rate of 19%.
- Consultants submitted 46 proposals and won seven, with a 15 % success rate.
- Industry submitted seven and all were unsuccessful.

There are some interesting developments here, because for all the rhetoric of meeting industry needs, there is little evidence of this transferring to NREC grants. Perhaps industry partners are in consortia with universities, TAFE and private providers. TAFE and university success rates are almost equal in outcomes, although TAFE submit only 19% of submissions compared to universities who submit 48%.

On all counts the success rate is very low, and there must be a growing number of frustrated potential researchers out there. The success rate has remained fairly stable at 18%, which means there is a fail rate of 82%! (Gibb 2000). In the context of these developments, such programs as Framing the Future and Learnscope are predicably attracting applications which merge research and teaching.

If we look at the categories where this research funding is allocated (Gibb 2000), we see:

- 70% of funds went to priority areas
- 24% of funds were allocated in the open category (long-term priorities or 'priorities not yet nominated')
- 6% were in consolidation studies (short studies on identified gaps).

There are no special categories for equity and social inclusion, as these are embedded and mainstreamed within the overall program. The wisdom of this in the context of the sorts of debates concerning the 'great divide' in equality of opportunity in the Howard era suggests some need for a rethink.

This split of funds creates questions about the nature and character of the orientation of VET research and the formation of an identity and purpose of VET research that is discussed in the next two sections.

The crisis of future identities for VET researchers

The instrumental and rationalist nature of publicly funded research has created significant dilemmas for the role of researchers and intellectuals in the broadest sense. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) have discussed the impact of the techno-rationality policy settings on the role of the intellectual and inquirer. They argue that there has been a shift towards what they term accommodating and hegemonic intellectuals and retreat from a critical discourse. They argue that the product of corporatist policy settings, rationing of scarce research resources and the techno-rational approach to administration have created a situation where silence and compliance are more valued than a critical voice. Habermas has described this tendency towards depoliticisation, arguing that the collapse of problematic issues to matters associated with a rational 'technological fix' acts to uncouple issues from the political process (Habermas 1990).

Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) highlight the danger of an uncritical research approach, where researchers are not aware of the process in which they are engaged and their enlistment as agents of the status quo. While these researchers argue they are dispassionate and objective - being removed from class, political and economic struggles - Aronowitz and Giroux suggest this is a spurious concept of scientific objectivity. They suggest that objectivity hides the colonisation of research agenda and research findings by major corporate interests and the interconnectivity and interdependence between capital, government and the producers of knowledge. The close relationship between the researcher and the public sector has, according to Aronowitz and Giroux, resulted in a collapse of the role of researcher and its replacement with a role of policy consultant. In this context, opportunities for social change is minimised and timid complicity maximised.

There are some serious questions about these changes that obscure the purpose and focus of the roles of all researchers. But it has serious implications for VET researchers in an environment dominated by 'evaluative' research that is mostly directed to the science of policy rather than a wider exploration of issues.

There is also a prevailing view that unless research is immediately 'useful' in addressing the needs of government, it lacks legitimacy. This attitude fails to appreciate the fact that research may address multiple audiences and that there is often a delay factor on the 'pick up' research. It is also an attitude that does little to encourage a diversity of viewpoints on the purpose and rationale of research in a democratic society.

In short there is a crisis of identity. This crisis sees:

- Research as evaluative and researchers as policy consultants running the risk of becoming captured by a public relations agenda that mutes problematic issues and is subject to vetting and sanitising. Far worse is the temptation towards suppression, a tendency that goes to the very heart of a democratic and open society. This was summarised by one respondent to Terri Seddon's 1999 address as 'blind systemic resistance'.

- Instrumental and evaluative research also suppresses broader questions about human rights, ecology, poverty, sexual discrimination, racism and questions concerning the more questionable outcomes of globalisation. Even though many funded projects deal with these issues, there is an anxiety and tension about how they should be present to avoid offending government elites.

- Research being developed and directed exclusively to an industry and government constituency runs the risk of preventing a meaningful interface with the practitioners and teachers in the VET system. This is a major issue in VET research, where the NTRA has been responsible for the disenfranchisement of VET teachers from many aspects of their professional role. The extent to which university researchers and consultants have been co-opted to conduct research 'on' VET teachers has been a disturbing trend, which has a divisive and corrosive impact on the ability for VET researchers in TAFE and universities to forge a unified identity.

Future opportunities

The future for VET researchers is increasingly related to the future changes to the work of teachers and VET practitioners. Many of the opportunities for postgraduate research are shrinking and success in competitive grants has such low odds of success that it is difficult to see where future developments will come from. There are several opportunities that also involve a broader notion of VET researchers and teachers' roles.

The roles of VET teachers are being reshaped profoundly by new learning technologies, the changing nature of work and the changing nature of their own organisations. This now includes an orientation to globalisation and working in culturally diverse contexts. This high level of change introduces new possibilities for merging aspects of improvement and innovation in their work to a research agenda. The phenomena of change and the processes and outcomes of these changes provide fertile opportunities for a new research culture that involves new forms of partnership between academics, researchers, practitioners, teachers and policy makers. In a way, the level of change is so profound for all partners that there is now a mutual interest in exploring new and creative ways of developing and maintaining VET research capacity.

One example that I can see emerging is the opportunities for very different relationships between universities and VET practitioners. The recent popularity of research by project degrees sees some important developments. These degrees not only provide an important credentialling function for VET practitioners, they also have the potential to reshape power relationships surrounding knowledge. Work-based degrees provide the opportunity for participants to theorise their experience of

change and to re-theorise the power relationships around work and workplaces. Universities have been forced to renovate and re-conceptualise their own views and practices concerning the teaching of research degrees, to include learning groups and clustered supervision etc in forms of action research which challenge the positivist notions of research that dominate VET.

Most importantly, there is a heightened opportunity to develop cooperative and collaborative research partnerships across the sectors that legitimate and theorise the workplace knowledge of practitioners, participants and the key stakeholders in the VET sector.

These sort of mutual partnerships need also to span simplistic binaries around notions of applied and theoretical research and seek to establish a role for VET researchers that challenges the instrumental perspectives of research.

The notion of the transformative intellectual proposed by Aronowitz and Giroux provides a signpost for future VET researchers, because their notion of the 'transformative intellectual' incorporates a commitment to collective forms of organisation that involves and engages all levels of educational professionals in projects. They argue for the establishment of collaborative social projects that engage the nature of school life. In the context of VET, this would provide opportunities for those involved in training. According to Aronowitz and Giroux, this would also provide opportunities to redefine the traditional practice and theory relationship within the context of alliances with each other. This overcomes the differentiation between the theoretical production of knowledge and practical knowledge, and assists to develop common social and political goals. It helps promote and trigger an integration between the political, the pedagogical and the analysis of issues in broader terms rather than narrow instrumental priorities of bureaucrats and reactionary politicians. This means that issues that have been excluded from instrumental policy settings such as human rights, gender equity, poverty alleviation, racial equality and the impact of globalisation may be resituated within a broader, more democratic research agenda.

An orientation around the notion of the transformative intellectual addresses one of the conclusions that John Stevenson arrived at in his summary of papers published in the Australia and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Research from 1993-1999. Stevenson concluded that

> It reinforces the need to redress the top down technological driven, short term focus of vocational curriculum, re-elevate the needs of learners, redress the problems in vocational knowledge development and assessment and overcome the stresses in the vocational education system caused by the nature and implementation strategies of the corporatist reform movement, this work is important both for practice and for informing policy (Stevenson 1999 p 122)

It is also important because the strategy resituates VET research in the broader dimensions of the political crisis that has engulfed Australian education and training.

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